

The Passover Symbols

Contributed by [JewishBoston](#)

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We have now told the story of Passover...but wait! We're not quite done. There are still several symbols on our seder plate we haven't explained. Rabban Gamaliel would say that whoever didn't explain the shank bone, matzah and *maror* (bitter herbs) hasn't done Passover justice.

The shank bone represents the "*pesach*," the special lamb sacrifice made in the days of the Temple for the Passover holiday. During the final plague, the Israelites were instructed to smear lamb's blood on the lintel of their homes so the angel of death would pass over their homes. The sacrifice and now the shank bone are called *pesach*, from the Hebrew word meaning "to pass over," because God passed over the houses of the Israelites when inflicting plagues upon their Egyptian oppressors.

The matzah on our table reminds us that when the Israelites were finally freed from bondage, they rushed to leave Egypt before Pharaoh could change his mind. As they fled, the dough they made for bread did not have time to fully rise, so they ate flat matzah instead. During Passover, we also eat matzah and refrain from eating anything that is leavened or can rise.

The bitter herbs symbolize the bitterness of slavery, the life of hard labor the Israelites experienced.

During our Passover seder, we are reminded over and over again to tell this important story of freedom to each other and to those who will come after us. We do this to remember, to feel a connection to the story of the Israelites so we will never take our freedom for granted. Every generation is plagued with different challenges to freedom, and our story takes on new meanings throughout hundreds and hundreds of years. In the modern era, alongside the symbols of old, newer elements have been added to many seder plates to remind us of present-day struggles and triumphs.

So how was it that the orange found its place on the seder plate as a symbol of feminism, egalitarianism and those who are often marginalized?

The story has it that scholar Susannah Heschel, daughter of Abraham Joshua Heschel, a preeminent modern Jewish philosopher, was inspired by the abundant new customs expressing women's viewpoints and experiences and started placing an orange on the seder plate.

At an early point in the seder, she asked each person to take a segment of the orange, make the blessing over fruit and eat the segment in recognition of all those in our midst who feel marginalized in the Jewish community. She encouraged each guest to spit out the seeds in their orange segment to reject hatred and homophobia. The bright and vibrant orange suggests the fruitfulness for the whole community when *everyone* is a valued and respected member.